

which one was this, Rowley or his partner? The man at the tent door himself settled the question as he said aloud:

"I wonder what that was. I heard something as sure as my name is Rowley. I wonder if those confounded cannibals are——"

There was a sudden spurt of flame from the bushes, and as the sharp crack of a rifle echoed among the hills, the man at the tent door crumpled up and fell on his face, shot through the heart. The next moment Vernon Shapland was running through the bush as fast as his legs could carry him, frantically, like a man distraught.

CHARTER V

CHARLES ROWLEY'S DISCOVERY

IT wanted yet three hours to sunset when Vernon Shapland returned to his camp, and he found Cordery seated upon a log, juggling with the two nuggets of gold that he had found on the previous day. His clothing was torn and caked with mud, and there was a look of intense disgust upon his face.

"What is the matter?" asked Shapland. "Anything wrong?"

"Everything's wrong," retorted the gold hunter. "I've been up that cliff and a mile beyond the head of the fall, and I've been down the river, and never the colour of gold have I seen. I reckon some fool must have just chucked these two beans in the river to cause other fools to waste their time. This place is a blank. There's no bonanza here. It isn't another Yodda River."

Vernon Shapland knew little about New Guinea affairs, but he had a dim idea that at Yodda River the gold-mining had proved profitable, and since he had no wish at the present moment to discuss his own expedition, he was willing to talk of gold-mining or of anything else.

'Yodda Rivers are scarce articles,' he said, by way of continuing the conversation.

"That's so, worse luck!" answered Cordery, and then asked the almost inevitable question, "See your man, Mr. Vernon?"

Shapland nodded. "Yes," he said slowly. "I saw him, but he wasn't the man I was looking for."

"Not the man! Then we've been chasing a goose?"

"Not quite! He was able to tell me that the man I have been looking for is dead, and so I can get back to England as soon as possible. It is very important that I should. I wonder if you'd mind striking camp to-day and starting on the way back. There are some hours of daylight yet——"

"You must be in a terrible hurry, Mr. Vernon, if you want to start to-day. But I don't mind if I do. This place has sickened me. As soon as we've had a meal—it's nearly ready—we'll start."

A look of relief came on Vernon Shapland's face, a look which Cordery noticed and wondered at. He looked at his employer more closely. His drill suit, the Japanese silk shirt were torn, some of the buttons were gone from the latter, and through the opening dangled a few links of a fine gold chain.

"You look as if you'd had rough going, Mr. Vernon."

"Pretty bad," answered Shapland as casually as he could. "The bush was simply awful."

Cordery nodded, then pointed to the end of the dangling chain.

"Lost something, haven't you?"

Vernon Shapland glanced downwards, and a look of dismay came on his face, as, when he tugged at it, the chain came out from under the silk shirt, showing two broken ends. Then he laughed nervously. "It's of no great moment," he replied; "only a little keepsake."

Cordery smiled broadly, a smile of complete understanding.

"The girl will forgive you if you tell her what the New Guinea bush country is like. I expect the chain caught somewhere and broke without you noticing it."

"It would seem so," answered Shapland thrusting the chain into his pocket.

Cordery rose from his seat and moved towards the fire. For a moment he busied himself with the contents of a cooking-pot, then he turned to his companion once more.

"I thought I heard the sound of a rifle a while back. Was it yours Mr. Vernon?"

Vernon Shapland's face went suddenly white. He glanced nervously towards his rifle, and, remembering that there was still an empty cartridge in the breech, conquered his first impulse to deny the fact.

"Yes," he said casually. "I saw a big snake—twelve or thirteen feet long at the very least, and was forced to pot it, as it was directly in the line of march."

"It was probably harmless," was the reply. "Most of the big snakes in this part of the country are."

Shapland's colour had come back. The other's obvious acceptance of the story had put him at his

ease once more, and during the meal that followed he was almost garrulous, talking steadily, whilst Cordery wondered why he should, for on the way up his employer had been almost taciturn, and quite naturally the guide attributed the change to the news which Shapland had learned on his morning's expedition.

An hour later, when they struck camp and set their faces towards the distant coast, Vernon Shapland's whistle was singularly bright and clear. The inheritance of Shapland was now his beyond dispute, and with Shapland, almost certainly would go the hand of Janet Selby.

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About the time that the Shapland expedition started on its return journey, a white man and two natives stood on the hill above the camp where the dead man lay in the tent doorway. The white man was young, tall and handsome, with steady blue eyes and curly brown hair, and, like his native companions, he carried a somewhat large bundle, having been to the nearest trading post for a stock of provisions. When he came in sight of the tent he gave a shout, and as he walked on, listened for any reply. The natives also shouted, and when no response came from the camp, one of them turned to the white man with a grin in the curious pidgin English which prevails in the Pacific, said: "Jim he tired. He sleep flenty strong. We sing out all one; we wake him by'n-by!"

All three lifted up their voices, startling the cock-a-toos in the trees about them, and still there was no response from the camp. A look that was more than a trifle anxious came on the white man's face, and the native, who had before spoken, caught it and interpreted it rightly.

"Maybe, Charley, Jim be dead. White man die plenty quick, along of fever. I no like it."

Charles Rowley did not like it either. The camp seemed ominously still and quiet, and he noticed that no smoke rose in the air from the usual place of the fire a few yards away from the tent. Fears of disaster began to pound at his heart. It was not fever only that his foster-brother, Jim, had risked in remaining alone at the camp. The natives in the immediate neighbourhood were friendly, but there was always the risk of raiding head hunters from the hills. Perhaps some of these had surprised Jim, perhaps—

Unconsciously his step quickened, and the natives, accelerating their pace, passed in front of him with their loads, following a native track through the bush which had been made a century or two ago. The track descended the hillside zig-zag like a military road, and as they came to the second turn a view of the tent door was afforded them. As this happened, the leading native stopped, shaded his eyes with his hand for a moment, and then pointed.

"Jim he dead, maybe plenty ill. He lie along of tent. He plenty quiet."

Charles Rowley gave one glance at the figure lying by the tent door, six hundred yards or so away, then he dropped his load, and began to run along the patch. When he reached the flat he made a bee-line for the tent, and as he reached the doorway a cloud of flies rose from the figure lying there. They told him that his foster-brother was dead, and for a moment he stood there, white and stricken, a man who had suffered irreparable loss. Then he fell on his knees, and turned the dead man over.

As he did so a large bloodstain on the front of the murdered man's shirt came into view, and he gave a sudden cry.

One of the blacks arrived at that moment, and as he caught sight of the stain he began to jabber.

"Jim, he no die of fever. He kill flenty quick. Who kill him belong here? Not native boy. He take head 'long of him. All the same Jim he flenty dead, like a stone."

The white man made no comment on these remarks. He knew that the substance of them was true, and that if his foster-brother had died by native hands, the body would not have been left intact, for the Papuan savage collects heads, much as the white man collects pottery. He tore open the shirt to examine the wound from which the blood had flowed. It was a surprisingly small one, round, and a little blue at the edges, and as his eyes fell on it, Charles Rowley ejaculated, "Shot? Who can have done it, and why?"

A thought occurred to him, and jumping to his feet he hurried into the tent, and strode to one corner where some sacks were piled. He threw one or two from the top, revealing a large canvas bag half filled with something, and tied at the neck. He felt it with thumb and finger, then he shook his head.

"It's not that," he muttered. "Whoever killed poor Jim didn't do it as a preliminary to robbery." He looked round and added; "The place hasn't been disturbed."

He went outside again and looked down at the dead face with stony eyes.

"Poor old Jim!" he said. "If I'd known this you should have gone, and I'd have stayed behind; but if ever I find the man who did it, God help me, but he shall swing for it!"

He slipped on to his knees again, kissed the dead man's forehead, covered the waxen face with a handkerchief, and then since the climate of New Guinea

does not permit of delay in burial, he strode away to find a suitable place for a grave. A few minutes later the two natives were hard at work digging, and within the hour the murdered man was laid in a narrow bed under a flowering hibiscus, the scarlet petals of which drifted down on the newly-upturned earth.

Charles Rowley was still standing by the grave, his face the index of stern thoughts, when one of the native boys ran towards him, crying excitedly :

“ Charley, I find him. He kil^d Jim—sure ! ”

Rowley swung round and caught a gleam of gold in the native’s hand.

“ What is it, Boromai ? ”

“ Him picture. I find him ’long of the bush there. Him woman, white woman, and he kill Jim—sure ! ”

Mystified, the white man held out his hand, and the black gave him a gold locket, which opened as he took it. As he looked he saw a girl’s portrait, beautifully executed by some miniature painter. The hair was golden ; the face^d was very beautiful ; the eyes that looked out at him were gravely sweet.

As he gazed he drew his breath sharply, and a look of wonder came on his face. For a moment he was lost to everything save the beauty of the girl ; then the voice of Boromai forced itself upon him, appallingly discordant.

“ I find him, Charley. He kill Jim ! He——”

“ Oh shut up, you unutterable idiot ! ” cried Rowley, and again his eyes sought the miniature in his hand.

The eyes in the miniature seemed to be looking straight into his own, and to be full of understanding. Never, he told himself, had he seen those eyes in the flesh, yet they did not seem as the eyes of a stranger, and in the first glance the beautiful face had won his heart. As he looked his heart beat faster, and he felt a

quickenings in his blood. Then once more Boromai intervened.

"He shoot Jim! I find him; I kill white woman.

"You are wrong, Boromai—quite wrong! There is no white woman like this in the New Guinea bush, this was brought here by some man who shot Jim for some inexplicable reason that we've got to find out. He must have left this behind unknowingly, and it should help us to find him. Anyhow, we shall learn if that is so inside a minute."

He took out a penknife, picked out the glass over the miniature, and when the ivory disc on which it was painted fell out into his hand, he turned it over.

On the back of it were two words:

"Crispi, London."

As he read them aloud he nodded to himself.

"London is a long way from here, Boromai," he said, "and it wouldn't suit you at all. But I've often wanted to go there, and now, unless the owner of this miniature returns to fetch it, I think I shall make the trip."

He was moving in waters too deep for Boromai's primitive mind, and the black offered no comment. After a little time Rowley restored the miniature and glass to their old place in the locket, carefully stowing the latter in a hidden pocket. Then he turned and entered the tent. As he did so a sense of inexpressible loneliness overcame him, and he stood looking round his canvas dwelling-place, almost overcome by the feeling of desolation induced by the withdrawal of a beloved presence. His eyes dimmed a little at the sight of Jim's possessions scattered carelessly about, but as they cleared they were caught by a brown-backed wide-leaved book which lay upon a packing case that served as a table.

At the sight of the book a sudden thought struck him, and taking a step forward he picked it up.

It was a diary, kept by his foster-brother, and the object of much brotherly chaff. It was little more than the barest record of his doings from day to day, some days filled in by an odd line, and others by the single word "Ditto," revealing that life even in the New Guinea bush may be as uneventful as in other places in the great world. Rowley turned the leaves rapidly, till he reached a date a fortnight old, a date that marked his own departure from the camp, then he began to read carefully from day to day, hoping to find some indication of the reason for his foster-brother's murder. The first eleven days revealed nothing, but the twelfth had a note which caused his eyes to light up with sudden interest.

"To-day saw smoke signals on the hills; and heard natives shouting the news that a party of white men was working its way across the ranges. I hope it doesn't mean that prospectors are coming this way, as it wouldn't suit our book for others to find out what Charley and I are working at. Shall keep a sharp look-out, and have taken the precaution to measure out and stake two claims according to the New Government requirements. We ought to have done the job months ago."

There the note for the day ended, and the next day's note was so full that it overflowed the allotted space and ran into the spaces below.

"Saw fresh smoke signals late this afternoon and heard a native shouting the news that a white man had been captured, and that at night there was to be a dance and feast. Kept a very sharp look-out, and about an hour before sunset saw a black stealing past the camp. I followed him and found that he was a 'boy' who had worked for us, one of the Tugeri crowd,

who are a rotten lot. He was on his way to the village across the range with whose inhabitants we had the row when we first started operations in this district. He was sullen and would say little except that he was going to some big tribal ceremony; and at length I had to let him go, having learned practically nothing. I suspected, however, that some devilry was on hand, and as I thought it quite possible that the captured white man was to be kai-kaied (eaten) I determined, as soon as it was quite dark, to make my way down the stream, and do what I could for the poor chap in case his own party was not able to help him. Therefore before dark I crossed to the range on the other side of the valley, and took a good look round. I saw little parties of natives making for the Tugeri village, and a long way down the other valley saw what looked like a tent; from which I guessed that the party to which the captive white man belonged was on his track, but did not know how near to the village they were.

“When it was dark I went down-stream to the back of the village. The Tugeri were kicking up a most infernal row, and dancing round a big fire in the middle of the village. Any one with half an eye could see what was on, and without wasting time I began to look for the captive. I located him in a hut towards the end of the village, and cutting a way out for him, got him well away and sent him off down-stream in the direction of his own camp. He showed some curiosity as to who I was, but mindful of our private interests I didn't tell him my name, and suggested a line of march to him that will take him well to the north of our camp. Don't know who the man was, but his voice had a tony sound which suggested that he was some sort of swell. Maybe he was one of those explorers who have begun to run about Papua these last few years. Anyway,

I've seen nothing of him or his lot this morning."

There the diary ended; and as Charles Rowley finished the reading he put down the book and stood for quite a long time in thought. Had that captive white man whom Jim had saved had anything to do with his brother's death?

That seemed too terrible to contemplate in view of Jim's exertions on his behalf, and his mind swung round to another possibility. Had the captive's rifle been stolen from him, and had the Tugeri, finding out the part played by his foster-brother in their captive's escape, shot him? They were unused to fire-arms, but it might happen that one of the tribesmen had seen a gun used, and a chance shot point-blank range could hardly miss.

Then again the thought of the locket, coming uppermost in his mind, swept the other thoughts aside. Jim he was sure had not had it in his possession, and it was only in the remotest degree likely that one of the Tugeri should have had the trinket in his possession. No, it had come with some white man, some man who, coming or returning, had been in such great haste as not to notice its loss. In that man lay the solution of the mystery of his brother's death. At all costs he must be found.

"And, by Heaven, I'll find him," he cried with a sudden violence of determination, "though I rick the world for him!"

And on his face, as he gazed through the tent fly to the new made grave under the hibiscus, came a look of grim resolution that boded ill for the man who had wrought the evil deed.